



A beautiful mess

Sean O'Toole

W— pulled up his shirtsleeve and showed me his tattoo, a boxed map of South Africa framed by a “cut here” stippled line. He was going to have it surgically removed and exhibited, he said. We were standing in the deep end of an empty swimming pool in Riviera, music spilling in from overhead.

‘The French,’ as W— always spoke of the cultural agency whose logo had for the past two years been attaching itself to so many of the art events around Newtown, were hosting a party

in an abandoned suburban mansion off Oxford Road.

Everyone was there, W— said. I only recognised William Kentridge, who in 1992 put a stethoscope to Woyzek’s heart and discovered unexpected township rhythms.

The tattoo had another line, W— pointed out, this one solid: it connected Johannesburg to Cape Town. He had recently driven the busy trade route south with Barend de Wet. The tattoo, W— explained, belonged

to Barend, and he planned to give it back. Brett Murray, curator of *Smokkel*, a fringe event to the second Johannesburg Biennale, had accepted his proposal.

Smokkel: verb, to smuggle, sometimes used as slang to denote a hustle.

W—'s parents lived in a small mining town. The year before, W—'s mother had phoned crying after reading an article by critic Ivor Powell in *Huis Genoot* magazine. Powell, a contributor to the *Trade Routes* catalogue, had written

a tabloid piece reporting that her son had donated his body to Wayne Barker. W— was always trying to escape his body. It was the reason we were in the pool.

He unwrapped a piece of paper, its tight origami folds securing a powdery substance. A speedball, he described it, an aphrodisiac combination of heroin and cocaine. W—, who spoke of Chris Burden and Hermann Nitsch as if they were actors or pop musicians, lit a flame and inhaled.

He swam back to the party through an anaesthetic murk.

The soundtrack to 1997 was bass-heavy, not jazzy like the sounds inside chisel-faced Woyzek's heart. M'du Masilela's *Ipompe* had just won best kwaito album. Brenda Fassie, whose lover Poppie Sihlahla had died of an apparent drug overdose in 1995, was clean and in the studio with Sello "Chicco" Twala recording her seminal album *Memeza*.

W— danced liked he walked, with a limp. A teenage motorbike

accident. All his body obsessions, the continual giving up of pieces of himself, traced their origins to the mangled foot he tucked into a battered pair of black boots.

The doctor who removed the tattoo was also a junkie, a beautiful and aloof junkie, like David Bowie during his Thin White Duke phase. In the video of W—'s tattoo removal, the doctor wears a surgical mask and hood. The precaution was legal rather than sanitary.

The surgery was performed in a

gallery, a former café turned exhibition space in Troyeville. It was the second, maybe third, incarnation of the Famous International Gallery, or FIG for short. Easy to find: right out of Bob's Bar onto Op de Bergen Street, up past the painter and chef Braam Kruger's Kitchen Boy restaurant, second road left into Pretoria Street. W— lived in the tiny backroom.

Where the opening of the first biennale was makeshift and drunken, Tokyo Sexwale, premier of the new Gauteng

Province, delivering a keynote speech under a marquee tent to all-comers, the tone of the second biennale was serious. Robyn Orlin inaugurated the opening with a Maude Lebowski-like action-gymnastic display inside the disused power station.

Francesco Bonami, writing in the catalogue, heralded a different seriousness, in his comments about 'the Islamic movement known as Taliban' and the 'reality of expansion from Macao to Bombay'. (He also offered that perhaps not much interesting

art is produced outside the borders of the United States and Europe right now...)

There was, it seemed, endless video work. The names of the artists were mostly unfamiliar. I remember one work, its maker unknown and unremembered: it showed urban detritus blowing in a breeze. It was beautiful and meaningless. Whenever I see leaves and plastic bags and things agitatedly swirling about, blown back and forth, I think of that video.

Across the road from the Turbine Hall,

outside a small corner building on Jeppe Street, Peet Pienaar, now a celebrated graphic designer, did a performance in a Springbok rugby outfit.

Inside the *Smokkel* venue Barend was etching designs onto circular pieces of glass. Cost: R200 each.

I bought two. They were my first ever purchase of a piece of art, but for an exploded view of a skull bought in New Orleans in 1995. But, and this I only learnt belatedly, the works were not meant as

keepsakes; rather, they were supposed to be smashed.

I did not know what it meant to invest in the ephemeral. I would know soon enough.

W— needed money, an advance as he put it, to make an edition of ten boxed VHS cassettes. They would contain an edited video document of the surgery and display of the tattoo at the exhibition. I deposited R1500 into his Standard Bank account.

The opening was succinct: visitors were shown footage of the surgery (gasps and outpourings of cringed expression), followed by the appearance of W—'s brother, dressed as a male nurse but looking like a Richard Prince painting, showing off the tattoo (repeat of background noise).

Later that evening, after the opening night festivities migrated east across town to Troyeville, someone broke into the *Smokkel* exhibition and stole all the TV monitors.

The biennale closed early. There was indignation. Kendell Geers tried to stage a protest in Pretoria. There was no edition of ten videos. W— moved to Cape Town, got arrested for attempted robbery, shared a mattress with a young man accused of stock theft in Pollsmoor Prison, had the charge dropped, drifted. Woyzek's heart changed its moods. Brenda Fassie died.

W— is a Facebook friend. Last I checked, he was off to France on holiday. 'Yeah, well, the Dude abides.'

If A Tree..., curated by Clare Butcher, is an exhibition seeking to revisit elements of the controversial second Johannesburg Biennale (entitled *Trade Routes: History and Geography*), which took place in Johannesburg and Cape Town in 1997. It is the second exhibition in the Stevenson gallery's *Trade Routes Project*.

If A Tree... takes its cue from the age-old philosophical dilemma about cause, effect and the contingency of witnessing history in the making. Presenting a mixed group of artistic generations and geographies, the exhibition traces speculative routes outwards from the second Johannesburg Biennale in order to gauge its bearing on local and transnational contemporary art practice.

The artists' projects included in the exhibition alternate between intimate reflections on direct encounters with the biennale 15 years ago, and broader comments on art's political economy in the surrounding city context. Each approach attempts to see the wood for the trees. What is the efficacy of reviving such a moment in the country's all too recent past - a time of interregnum and uncertainty, with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in full swing? Are the biennale's original themes still relevant in today's immigration and economic crises? And how do we realise the generative possibilities embedded within this contested archive of art history in the present?

The artists included are James Beckett (South Africa/Netherlands), Dineo Seshee Bopape (South Africa), Heman Chong (Singapore) with Eduardo Cachucho (South Africa), Yvonne Dröge Wendel (Netherlands), Paul Edmunds (South Africa), Simon Gush (South Africa), Nicholas Hlobo (South Africa), Phillip Raiford Johnson (South Africa/UK), Antonis Pittas (Greece/Netherlands), Colin Richards (South Africa), Robin Rhode (South Africa/Germany), Lerato Shadi (South Africa/Germany) and Kemang Wa Lehulere (South Africa).

Bearing in mind the expansive nature of the original biennale, *If A Tree...* aims to make connections not only between the biennale and the included artists but between the exhibition and the contemporary cultural landscape of the city of Johannesburg. During July an ancillary programme comprising a biennale archive, conversations and screenings will be hosted by the independent project space, Parking Gallery (www.parking-gallery.net); additionally, a number of the exhibition works will involve direct public intervention; and a few of the artists will be stationed at the residency and project space, Sober & Lonely Institute for Contemporary Art. An informative guide will accompany the exhibition with texts on the artists and their projects, and a number of walkabouts will be scheduled.

If A Tree... follows *Trade Routes Over Time*, at Stevenson Cape Town in April/May 2012; the project will conclude with a third exhibition at the end of the year in Cape Town, accompanied by a *Trade Routes Project* publication containing archival documentation and research essays.

The exhibition opens on Thursday 5 July, from 6 to 8pm. The exhibition will run from 5 July - 4 August 2012 in Johannesburg.

Clare Butcher invited Heman Chong on 6 February 2012 to produce a new work for this exhibition. Heman Chong met Eduardo Cachucho on 14 February 2012 in Paris. After a couple of discussions over the next few days, they decided that their project would be to invite a writer from South Africa to write a description of what he saw during the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale. They wrote to Clare about this idea, who agreed to who agreed to float the text with a writer. Sean O'Toole agreed on 6 May 2012 to produce a new essay for this exhibition. He submitted his text containing 1014 words entitled 'A beautiful mess' to the artists 28 May 2012. He has also agreed to allow the artists to freely distribute the text during the course of this exhibition.